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THE VICTORIAN TOUCH IN FICTION

SENTIMENTALITY ON STILTS

By LOUIS J. MCQUILLAND

THE two besetting weaknesses of Victorian fiction were sentimentality of conception and stiltedness of diction. Even writers of the first rank were not immune from the qualities of these defects. We forgive the sentimentalism of Dickens because of his genius and of his humour, as we forgive the Amelia-ritty of Thackeray because of his strength and of his irony. Much of the admired fiction of the Victorian era, however, will be remembered mainly because of its unconscious humour and almost incredible naïveté. Even acknowledged masters of the novel displayed an ingenuousness at times which more than verged upon the sheerly ludicrous.

Take, for example, the Rochester of Charlotte Brontë's declared masterpiece, *Jane Eyre*. He is one of the first of those strong, stern, sardonic heroes who babble like young ladies' boarding-schools and behave like schoolboys in a condition of calf-love. His conversation gives one the earache. At Jane's first meeting with Rochester she is much impressed by his appearance, "firstly, because it was masculine, and, secondly, because it was dark, strong, and stern; his eyes and gathered eyebrows looked ireful and thwarted." He was also endowed with a "deep and rather sarcastic voice," and, it is to be feared, wore side-whiskers. Rochester is a strong-minded misogynist, but later he refers to himself (advisedly) as "a spoony." He makes strong play with a cigar, like all the Victorian heroes,

"breathing a trail of Havannah incense on the freezing and sunless air." He takes a firm and lordly tone in his conversations with the modest governess: "Order! No snivel!—no sentiment!—no regret! I will endure only sense and resolution." When Rochester gets into a cloak and bonnet and veil and masquerades as an old gipsy woman, we realise that he is not nearly so sensible as Miss Brontë fondly imagines. Among his terms of endearment to Jane are "provoking puppet" and "malicious elf." Jane is not hard to please as regards lover-like attentions. When the dignified Rochester is displeased with her, he drops the honeyed words already chronicled: "For caresses I now get grimaces; for a pressure on the hand, a pinch on the arm; for a kiss on the cheek, a severe tweak of the ear." When Rochester fails in his scheme of a false marriage with the gentle Jane, thanks to the untimely appearance of his maniac wife, he explains to his friends that he wanted Jane "Just as a change after that fierce ragout" (the unfortunate Mrs. Rochester). When the happy ending comes, and Jane is united to the imperious Edward, "They talk (on Miss Brontë's testimony) all day long." The gratified Jane exults: "I know no weariness of my Edward's society; he knows none of mine." Judging by previous samples of Edward's dialectics, his marital rhapsodies are best unrecorded.

In the work of Disraeli we get a pom-



Courtesy of Arthur H. Hahlo & Company.

A PICTURE PUZZLE

Tenor warbling with passionate emphasis on the first word of each line—

“Mee-e-e-t me once again!

Mee-e-e-t me once aga-a-ain! . . .”

Why does the cat jump off the Hearth-Rug, rush to the door, make
frantic endeavour to get out?

From an original drawing by Du Maurier.

pous stiltedness which is not much concerned with sentiment. His characters are much more engaged with affairs of State than affairs of love, but his love scenes when they occur have the conventions of the period acutely marked. In all his fiction one gets a suburban feeling of splendour. His sense of luxury was that of a transformation scene in a provincial pantomime. He dwelt with delight on rich sounds and the pomp of picturesque names. He could conceive of no scene of human happiness without at least one duke in the background, but, as a rule, they were very much in the foreground. Take note in *Lothair* of the ball given at Crecy House to celebrate the entrance of Lady Corisande into society:—

Royalty, followed by the imperial presence of ambassadors, and escorted by a group of dazzling duchesses and paladins of high degree, was ushered with courteous pomp by the host and hostess into a choice saloon, hung with rose-coloured tapestry, and illuminated by chandeliers of crystal, where they were served from gold plate.

It is astonishing to think that the writer of such flamboyantly vulgar passages as this should have had any connection, except by means of the servants' hall, with the world about which he was writing. The excerpt given, which has been admired by such a sound English critic as Mr. G. W. E. Russell, would today be disdained by the most illiterate of novelette writers.

In the region of sentiment *Dizzy* was implicitly Victorian, as witness in the same book the scene wherein Lothair finally decides to declare his intentions to the fair Corisande. As usual, in the fiction of those days, the lady was overwhelmed by the honour done to her by the masculine offer: "He soothed and sustained her agitated frame, and sealed with an embrace her speechless form."

Disraeli had a very brilliant disciple in Ouida, though she was said to have modelled herself more closely on the author of *Guy Livingstone*. She was not as pompous as Disraeli in her diction, but she was quite as snobbish in her outlook. Her heroes were heavy sinners and fierce smokers (the cigar is invariably the Victorian symbol of virility). Her early types have been immortalised by a clever verse:—

"Ouida, Ouida,
Now, indeed, ah,
How does your garden grow?
With a countess shady,
A lord and a lady,
And guardsmen all in a row."

All her men, heroes and villains alike, are great dandies. *Strathmore* shows them at the top of their bent:—

Valdor (a bad man) was one of the most insouciant of blondins, and boasted that he never reflected but on two subjects—the fit of his gloves and the temperature of his eau-de-Cologne bath.

Strathmore's friend, Bertie Errol, was built, extrinsically, on much the same lines: "The Beau Sabreur, as he had been nicknamed, was soft as silk in the hands of a beauty, and as impressionable as wax when fairy fingers were at work." The hero, however, as became his legitimate Victorianism, was made of somewhat stronger stuff. He was a stern, bearded figure, who seemed to have stepped out of a portrait by Vandyke, and also a tower of strength to the House of Lords. In the words of his friend, Bertie, he was "panoplied with protocols and sworn to the State." He smoked "the strongest of Cabañas." *Strathmore* was a ladies' man, of course, but in the usual masterful Victorian way. The women fed out of his hand. Ouida's discriminating admirers will prefer to remember her by her artistic stories of

Italian peasant life, such as *Two Little Wooden Shoes*, or by the mature brilliancy of *The Massereenes*. The inveterate sentimentalists, however, will continue to adore *Under Two Flags*, whether on paper, stage, or film.

Just listen now to how the characters talk in one of the most admired novels of a once much admired authoress—the *Infelice* of Mrs. Augusta Evans Wilson:—

"Mother, what did you say to her, by way of a dose of orthodoxy, to antidote the metempsychosis poison?" asked Mr. Lindsay. The mother responds:

"Tell me, you bewitching Gamaliel, where you accumulated your knowledge relative to the education of girls. Present us a chart of your experience. You talk of hampering and cramping Regina's faculties as if I had put her brains in a pair of stays, and daily tightened the laces."

Mrs. Wilson is here revealed in a light, playful and simple frame of mind. In her customary serious vein she employs few words under four syllables, and her style is as delicate as a Carter Paterson pantechnicon. Her *St. Elmo* will be remembered as creating even a greater stir than Mrs. Barclay's *The Rosary*.

To Miss Rhoda Broughton belongs the credit of creating the ugly heroine—not the plain-headed girl who afterwards becomes beautiful—she is as old as Cinderella—but the heroine who remains plain all the time. At a time when red hair was considered a disfigurement, all Miss Broughton's heroines wore it. They were dowered with snub noses and sported freckles until early middle-age. In those days her romances were considered dangerous exotic blooms, and *Cometh Up As a Flower, Good-bye, Sweetheart!* and *Red as a Rose is She* were perused by stealth, with bated breath and flushed cheeks by the Victorian maidens. The plain heroine was a movement in the direction of common sense,

since there is more of her in the world than of the ultra-beautiful variety. Miss Broughton's heroines have the courage to come down off their stilts and approximate very closely to real speech, though, perhaps, a little too fond of saying "Did not I!" when a simpler form of collocation would have suited. Miss Broughton, indeed, may be counted one of the moderns as far as Victorian literature goes. The old sentimentality is there, but it is redeemed from time to time with the savour of practicality. The rose-bud garden of girls has given place to vigorous shoots of hollyhocks and beds of healthy chrysanthemums.

Miss Charlotte M. Yonge and Mrs. Emma Jane Worboise tie for first place with the Evangelical novel: *The Daisy-Chain* runs a dead-heat with *Heart's-Ease in the Family*. The glory of John Strange Winter has departed, but old-fashioned people still chuckle over *Boyles' Baby*, or smile sadly over the bygone vogue of *Beautiful Jim*.

Mrs. Hungerford, in such innocent romances as *Molly Bawn* and *Green Pleasure and Grey Grief*, provided her readers with agreeable bread-and-butter with some sugar on top. She also invented the young rose-widow, not yet fully blown, but with several buds of daughters in attachment.

The anxieties of Mrs. Henry Wood's characters are generally occasioned by concealed murders, forgeries, or debts, but the worries of the young matron, as in *Mrs. Halliburton's Troubles*, are the main cares of secluded lives. Unsophisticated people of our own day, however, are still very capable of weeping copiously over disconsolate Lady Isabel transformed into tragic Madame Vine, in the lachrymose pages of *East Lynne*.

Miss M. E. Braddon stands head-and-shoulders above all the Victorian medioc-

rities. She heads the middle-class of fiction by reason of deft craftsmanship, a real instinct for characterisation and plot, and a very genuine knowledge of the life of her time in the drawing-room, the country-house, the studio and the stage.

As a superlative example of the uttermost bathos of the Victorian novel I quote from the pages of *Irene Iddesleigh*, a romance written in the early 'nineties by the garrulous and incoherent pen of Mrs. Amanda McKittrick Ross. Here is Mrs. Ross's conception of a domestic quarrel. An infuriated husband is speaking:—

Was I duped to ascend the ladder of liberty,
the hill of harmony, the tree of triumph, and the

rock of regard, and, when wildly manifesting my act of ascension, was I to be informed of treading still in the valley of defeat! Speak! Irene! wife! woman! Do not sit in silence and allow the blood that now boils in my veins to ooze through cavities of unrestrained passion, and trickle down to drench me with its crimson hue!

Now and again one hears the plaint of a young woman of to-day, "I want a really strong man, who will master me." Does she mean that she is pining for a brute who will kick her? No, she is wistfully recalling, by a process of atavism, the sombre, saturnine, idiotic Victorian hero and the simpering, sloppy, sentimental Victorian heroine who talked like books—and never existed outside their pages.—*Everyman, London.*

AN EXTRACT FROM "BRITISH POETS IN INDIA".

THOMAS FRANK BIGNOLD

Bignold created that unexampled quatrain which will do more than potential universities and political agitators to immortalize Eastern Bengal.—ED.

Our Church as at present it stands
Has no congregation, nor steeple;
The Lands are all low lying lands
And the people are low lying people.
—*The Calcutta Review.*